



# Ride of a Lifetime

By Cpl. Daron Aukerman, USMC

**W**e preflighted in the late afternoon for a day-into-night unaided flight. As a CH-46E crew chief, I frequently fly on confined-area-landing (CAL) hops. Although we often don't fly at night without night-vision goggles, I was well rested and up to the challenge. I was hot seating into a turning aircraft. I had plenty of time to carefully preflight my gear, including my gunner's belt.

During the hot-seat turnover, the offgoing crew chief told me the crew door had come open on him on two occasions; I heeded his warning. My AO and I latched the door, made sure it was secure, and kicked at it just to check. "Maybe," I thought, "the other crew chief just had not secured it properly." I didn't think to actually inspect the crew door for damages. I also didn't feel the door was a safety issue because I usually don't lean on the door. We taxied and took off.

On the first landing in the zone, I saw a gouge in the metal just above the spring that holds the door latched closed or open. I didn't think this gouge was the problem because the door didn't open when we kicked it. Just to make sure, we opened and closed the door after two more landings to see if we could duplicate the problem but couldn't.

The sky was getting darker, and the next part of the flight was unaided. The HAC took the controls for the first night-unaided landing, and, as we came in on short final, the crew door finally flew open. Although I was standing

just inside and not leaning on the door, I was sucked out of the plane by the rushing wind. I felt a sudden jolt as my gunner's belt snapped me back. Had I not been wearing it, I would have fallen at least 30 feet to the ground.

Stunned and unable to reach my long cord, I could not tell my crew mates what had happened, so I rode to the ground hanging outside the aircraft. Once on the ground, I released my belt and signaled from outside the aircraft to a surprised pilot. The AO was just as surprised because he had been concentrating on the landing. Because the door was a safety issue, and I had hurt my back on the open crew door in the fall, we terminated all training. We cargo-strapped the door shut and returned to base.

If not for my gunner's belt, I could have been injured or killed. No matter how routine the mission, even small discrepancies should be noted and inspected. Always inspect your gear and properly wear your gunner's belt or restraint device; it may save your life, as it did mine. Use operational risk management (ORM) because even the smallest detail can turn into a dangerous situation.

In hindsight, I should have told the HAC about the door and had airframe personnel inspect it before accepting the aircraft. My checkup at the hospital found only a few bruises, so, instead of a serious injury, I just learned a valuable lesson. I also earned one more story for my helmet bag. 🦺

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